

# King Menelik II and the Establishment of an Ethiopian Postal Service

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This colourful early-20th century advertising card (left) is a representation of the early days of the Abyssinian postal service. It was one of a series on postal systems around the world, sponsored by a French company, Chocolat Carpentier. What follows is a brief overview of the early history of the founding of postal services in Abyssinia (i.e., the Ethiopian Empire).

King Menelik II (1844-1913) is regarded as the architect of the modern state of Ethiopia. Prior to his installation as the Emperor of Ethiopia (1889), he had been the King of Shewa, a major region in the central part of the country. Prior to his accession, Ethiopia was ill-prepared for the challenges it faced. It was more a collection of often-feuding states, each with its own ruler. Meanwhile the rush to colonize Africa had reached a feverish pace, following the broad-brush agreement of would-be colonial powers on the carving-up of Africa, reached at Berlin in 1885. First the Egyptians, and then the Italians, French, and British all had their eyes on the Ethiopian prize. By the time of his installation, all three of these European powers had established footholds along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coasts and were seeking to expand inland.

In the early years of his reign, Menelik moved to establish his authority throughout the country by challenging the quasi-independence of the regional states. He also conducted a series of military campaigns to expand and consolidate Ethiopian control over surrounding regions, effectively doubling the size of the country. Treaties were signed with the threatening colonial powers for the recognition of Ethiopia's borders, to include newly-conquered territories. However, Italy repudiated its treaty in 1893 and launched an invasion in 1895. In March, 1896, Menelik's forces won an epic victory over the Italian invaders at the Battle of Adwa, forcing Italy to sign a treaty recognizing the Ethiopian Empire's borders and sovereignty.

Menelik understood that Ethiopia's long-term survival as an independent state depending on the rapid modernization of the country. With this goal in mind, he recruited Swiss national Alfred Ilg to oversee the development of a postal service and the construction of a railway from the capital, Addis Ababa to the coastal town of Djibouti in French Somali Coast. It was a calculated risk: the rail line that would accelerate the development of Ethiopia also potentially provided a conduit for would-be colonizers to invade the country. The construction of the 785 km-long railway commenced in 1894 and finished in 1902. It was an astonishing feat of engineering, as it passed through rugged mountainous terrain, rift valleys and deserts along its path to Addis Ababa (2355 m above sea level!). The route is shown on the map (right).

Ilg's arrangement with the King allowed Ilg and his French partner, Leon Chefneux, to establish a private postal service. The first issue of stamps reached Ethiopia in January, 1895. There were seven values, with two designs: one showed King Menelik II in profile, and the other, the Lion of Judah.



These first designs (right) remained in use until 1909. Later versions of them received various overprints for security purposes.



In the early years of postal services, Ethiopian stamps were only valid for use within the country itself, because Ethiopia had not yet joined the UPU. Mail to international destinations had to be franked with stamps of

a UPU member country, in addition to having Ethiopian stamps for domestic postage. Most international mail was co-franked with stamps from French Somali Coast (or Obock prior to 1902) and postmarked in the town of Djibouti. Some mail also passed through the town of Zaila in the British Protectorate of Somaliland and onward via Aden; these letters were co-franked with stamps of India. Inbound international covers were also co-franked, requiring Ethiopian stamps for the last leg of the journey. Inbound co-franked covers are rare, while outbound covers and postcards, though less scarce, still sell for hundreds of dollars. The need to co-frank mail to/from international destinations ended in 1908 when Ethiopia joined the UPU.

As to early domestic mail, most of it was carried in and between the larger towns close to the line of rail. In addition to Addis Ababa, the places most frequently served in the early years were Dire Dawa (a rail town not far from French Somali Coast) and Harar (an ancient regional capital and trade centre, just south of Dire Dawa). The great majority of the country remained unserved in these early days.

The early arrangement whereby the postal service was operated privately by Ilg and Chafneux led to some shenanigans. Significant quantities of Ethiopian stamps were diverted to stamp dealers in Paris, and some of these came back to be sold for postal use in Ethiopia. To counteract this illicit trade in the country's stamps, the original values received several different overprints over time. These overprints were, in turn, an attractive target for philatelic forgers. One of the expatriates hired by Ilg to help administer Ethiopian postal services, Jean-Adolph Michel, was himself implicated in the production and sale of forged overprints. Michel had already been 'manufacturing' items with the philatelic market in mind. Knowing that French Somali Coast had bisected some values of its stamps because of shortages of certain values, Michel produced his own bisects (pass the scissors!) and used them on co-franked mail to his stamp-dealer friends.

In 1906, Menelik parted ways with Ilg and established the Imperial Ethiopian Posts, appointing Michel as the Director(!?) Michel continued to engage in funny-business in his new role.

There is much more to the story of Ethiopia's postal beginnings than can be told in this brief overview. To delve into this fascinating story, see the excellent sources listed below.



*Primary sources:*

U.J. Lindahl, "Ethiopia's unique postal history", *Posthorn*, 01-2019, pp. 44-67.

[ethiopianphilatelicsociety.weebly.com/exhibitsstudies.html](http://ethiopianphilatelicsociety.weebly.com/exhibitsstudies.html)

*At the frontier*, postcard view of a train at the border between Ethiopia and French Somali Coast, mailed in 1908 and franked with a Somali Coast stamp.